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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL PTER TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND: THE HDC DIALOGUE RESUMES

REF: A. BANGKOK 01980 (ENDURING VIOLENCE AND THE WAY FORWARD)

1B. CHIANG MAI 00089 (POSSIBLE RESUMPTION OF SECRET DIALOGUE)

1C. BANGKOK 02871 (PEACE TALKS IN INDONESIA)

1D. BANGKOK 01508 (RESPONSIBILITY FOR JUNE 8 MOSQUE ATTACK)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B, D)

(U) This cable was jointly drafted by Embassy Bangkok and ConGen Chiang Mai.

Summary and comment:

11. (S) In a late July meeting, HD Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) representative Michael Vatikiotis briefed us on RTG efforts to revive the HDC brokered dialogue between the Thai government and insurgents in southern Thailand. In subsequent meetings with CG in Chang Mai, Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace provided us further detail on the state of the dialogue and a readout on the August 14 round of talks. According to our interlocutors, PM Abhisit has agreed to resume discussions with militants in the South, and has reestablished a committee in the National Security Council --with Tamthai as chairman --to run the process.

Subsequently, the RTG and Vatikiotis established a negotiating team for direct dialogue with what they believe is the combined leadership of the primary insurgent groups operating in the South. The team is composed of Tamthai and an NSC staffer, plus two Democrat Party MPs: Kraisak Choonhaven and Somkiat Pongpaiboon. Tamthai reported his team met with the insurgent groups on August 14 in Jakarta, where they presented a letter to the insurgent leaders notifying them of the RTG's intent to resume the secret peace dialogue, and formally inviting them to join the talks.

Various confidence-building measures were also discussed, as well as concerns about efforts by some Malaysian officials to block the dialogue. Both Vatikiotis and Tamthai asserted to us that Malaysia was still an obstacle to progress in the talks; the PM, however, has decided to ask it for assistance.

12. (S) Comment: We concur that the HDC-sponsored dialogue currently offers the best hope for moving the conflict in

southern Thailand towards resolution. It is apparent that PM Abhisit considers ending the insurgency to be a top priority, and his move to replace the Secretary General of the National Security Council with someone who recognizes the necessity to work towards reconciliation is welcome. Whether or not Abhisit can overcome reluctance by opponents of talks in the army to deliver on any possible deal remains an open question (ref A). The potentially explosive connection of the gunmen in the June 8 mosque killings to the Queen's Volunteer Defense Force Project, and the emerging information that the one person subject to an arrest warrant was a military informant who has now disappeared, raises questions whether the RTG will be able to deliver on a promise of justice in the case. We understand Vatikiotis's frustration with Malaysian interference in the dialogue process, but for the insurgency to end, Malaysia must increase its cooperation with the Thai government. Abhisit's effort to enlist Malaysia's help is a sign that he understands the transnational nature of the conflict, as well as the need to increase cooperation and trust with its neighbors to end it. End summary and comment.

Dialogue back on track

¶ 3. (S) According to HDC representative Michael Vatikiotis, Prime Minister Abhisit is heavily engaged in finding a solution to the conflict in southern Thailand, and is committed to the HDC brokered peace process. He said the public statements the PM made in June about the possibility of having a dialogue with the separatists, and the formation of a special administration zone for southern Thailand, were

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based on an HDC proposal to resume the peace process (Ref A). He said Abhisit saw no reason why a political solution to the conflict could not be found within the context of the Thai constitution, and in May he received the PM's approval to move the process forward again. He put together a negotiating team comprised of DP deputy party leader Kraisak Choonhaven, Somkiat Pongpaiboon -- a Democrat Party list MP from Nakhon Ratchasima, and Mark Tamthai from Payap University in Chiang Mai. He reported that Somkiat was the key person on this team because of his access to Abhisit, and noted that Kraisak was important because he is trusted by civil society, including Malay Muslims, and can stand up to Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thuagsuban, who does not appear enthusiastic about the process. He described Mark Tamthai as being less important in the process because he is not part of the political decision-making leadership.

NSC vs ISOC

¶ 4. (S) In response to questions about the role of the Internal Security Operations Command and the Royal Thai Army (RTA) in the dialogue process, Vatikiotis said he believes military commanders on the ground in the South understand the situation and are more amenable to the initiative than senior commanders in Bangkok. He said he does not believe the RTA is "in charge" of resolving the conflict, and although it has the power to undermine the dialogue efforts, it has no authority over the political process. Security operations on the ground are different from peace building, he said. If the government gets stronger, the RTA could be less of a factor; regardless, he said, the RTA is not an insurmountable obstacle, and the ISOC cannot overrule the NSC on the national policy level.

The first move

¶5. (S) Vatikiotis said the RTG made the offer to resume the dialogue to the insurgents in Jakarta, during the first week of July, and that Kraisak carried a specific message from the PM as a way of signaling the government's serious intentions. Kraisak, he said, gave the "movement" details about the June 8 Mosque attack, pinning the blame on the defense volunteers, and told them that the RTG plans to take action. He said representatives from both the primary insurgent groups, PULO and BRN-C, were in the meeting.

Vatikiotis said Kraisak did not name the attackers, however, and he was not concerned the BRN-C would try to find the perpetrators to extract revenge; "even the movement believes this attack was an aberration and are not looking for individuals to blame," he said.

¶6. (S) Vatikiotis continues to believe he is talking to the combined leadership of BRN-C and PULO. He acknowledged that the BRN-C does not fully trust the government's efforts, but thinks PULO is firmly on-board. He said PULO has fully disclosed the details of its leadership to him. These groups, according to Vatikiotis, are not looking for independence, but rather want a dialogue regarding what could be possible, and a stake in their political future.

Vatikiotis said there are two remaining elements that need to be brought into the process: one is the small group of people who are active on the ground in the South but not associated with either of the major insurgent groups, and the other is the religious leaders.

Worried about other interested parties

¶7. (S) Vatikiotis told us that Malaysia continued to be a problem by insisting that it be part of the peace process. He lamented that PM Abhisit likes Malaysian PM Najib, and has asked Najib for assistance in dealing with the issue. Vatikiotis said he plans to follow-up with the Malaysians, but is at a loss on how to engage them. As for Indonesia, he said that since Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla,

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recent electoral loss, there has been much less pressure coming from Indonesia to be part to the dialogue. Juha Christensen --Finnish businessman who advised the Aceh Monitoring Mission and was a key in player in setting-up the Kalla brokered "Bogor round" of peace talks last September in Indonesia -- could become a problem, however (Ref C). He said he does not trust Juha, and the insurgents believe Juha is working with Malaysia - whom they do not trust. Vatikiotis also claimed former Prime Minister Chavalit was again meddling in the South, and has made the movement uneasy. He said Chavalit still has pull in southern Thailand and his efforts caused one BRN-C leader to tell Vatikiotis that the BRN was unhappy with Chavalit and "planned to take action."

Abhisit Authorizes Resumption of Secret Talks

¶8. (S) Consul General met August 6 and 17 in Chiang Mai with Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace. An upbeat Tamthai confirmed that the RTG's secret talks with southern insurgents were officially back on track. Prime Minister Abhisit signed off on this in July, authorizing the reestablishment of the RTG's side of the talks under the aegis of the National Security Council. With this authorization, the NSC has resurrected its Committee for the Discussion of Peace in Southern Thailand, with Tamthai again in his previous role as chairman. Along with this comes the un-freezing of the Committee's budget, which had been frozen for over a year by former NSC Secretary General Surapon Puanaiyaka, a holdover from the previous government who was finally removed from office by Abhisit in June.

¶9. (S) Tamthai said PM Abhisit was insistent that the dialogue process be run by the NSC, which Abhisit formally chairs. This arrangement allows Abhisit to direct the NSC's actions, without requiring official approval by Parliament or the Cabinet. The NSC Committee has a three-person advisory board comprised of the RTA Commander-in-Chief, the Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary, and the NSC Secretary General. Tamthai had good things to say about new NSC SYG Tawin Piansri, a career civilian NSC staffer. (Embassy comment: Our first interactions on other issues with Tawin have been encouraging. End comment.) He noted that Tawin has good relations with RTA Commander Anupong Paochinda, his fellow classmate from a national defense university course. Tamthai cautioned, however, that the advisory board slots were accorded by position, not person, and thus likely subject to a complete turnover in the event of a change in government. Working for Tamthai on his Committee is the NSC Deputy Secretary General, and others whom Tamthai may appoint depending on need.

Abhisit's Political Calculation

¶10. (S) CG asked Tamthai whether PM Abhisit, by pushing forward with the peace dialogue, was risking antagonizing hardliners in the military whose support he would need to deal with other major national issues, ranging from coalition stability to "red-yellow" clashes to royal succession. Tamthai believes the risk is relatively low, because in his view the peace dialogue is the only current hope for resolving the southern violence. "Nothing else (in the South) is working," he said. If other approaches were showing promise, then resumption of the dialogue "would not get off the ground." When those who question the dialogue are asked to suggest a better alternative, they fall silent. Tamthai claims that a growing number of military officials now see dialogue as the best way to end the cycle of violence.

Dialogue Officially Resumes

¶11. (S) Tamthai reported that the secret dialogue officially resumed with a brief session held on August 14 in Jakarta.

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The RTG was represented by Tamthai, an NSC staffer, and Democrat Party heavyweight Kraisak. According to Tamthai, Kraisak was there to signal PM Abhisit's seriousness about the process, and would eventually drop out once the dialogue got going again. At the meeting, Tamthai handed the insurgent leaders a letter officially informing them of the RTG's intent to resume the secret peace dialogue, and formally inviting them to join the talks. Earlier in the month, Tamthai had sent copies of this letter not only to the two groups that had been involved in the talks before - PULO and the BRN-Coordinate - but also to two additional groups recommended by the former. These groups were the BRN-Congress, and the BIPP (Tamthai could not identify what the latter acronym stood for). According to Tamthai, the BRN-Congress and BIPP were older groups that no longer controlled any fighters on the ground and were not particularly influential. These two additional groups did not attend the August 14 talks, however. Tamthai surmised that, for one thing, the two groups did not have enough lead time to arrange to attend. For another, the insurgent movement continues to try to consolidate and may now be reluctant to muddle the picture by adding additional organizations to its dialogue team.

¶12. (S) The letter also stated that the RTG sees this dialogue as the sole channel for talks between it and the insurgents. Tamthai explained that this helps shield the insurgent groups from approaches by other "pretender"

dialogue overtures, both from inside Thailand and abroad. He mentioned two such overtures, downplaying both. He felt former PM Chavalit was dropping out of the picture, and said neither the RTG nor the insurgents were interested in Finnish businessman Juha Christensen's offer to facilitate the peace effort.

Balky Movement on CBMs

¶13. (S) The August 14 talks focused primarily on confidence-building measures, Tamthai said:

-- Investigation of the June 8 mosque killings reportedly perpetrated by volunteer paramilitaries linked to a military figure close to the royal family. Tamthai reported that police have issued an arrest warrant, and are now conducting a manhunt for a triggerman who was identified via ballistics.

He said the insurgent leaders are reasonably satisfied with progress in the case, and appreciate that PM Abhisit has made a personal commitment to seeing through the prosecution, regardless of the perpetrators, alleged links. Tamthai cautioned, however, that the case would get more difficult to pursue "the higher up it goes." (Note: for more on this case, see ref D).

-- Possible release of imprisoned Muslim spiritual leader Baba Betong. Tamthai has long supported the release of the elderly Betong as a goodwill gesture, and claims PM Abhisit favors the move. However, movement is stalled by a major backlog in the caseload of the Supreme Court, which would have to hear Betong's appeal of the Appellate Court ruling upholding his life sentence. The RTG has floated the idea of having Betong drop his appeal, thereby closing the case, so that PM Abhisit could then propose to the King the granting of clemency. This approach is not risk-free for Betong, Tamthai admitted, because no one can pre-judge what the King would decide. Another concern shared by both sides is that release of Betong could backfire badly were he subsequently to be killed by anti-peace vigilante groups.

-- Creation of a pilot peace zone in Yala city. This measure, long championed by Tamthai, is unlikely to move forward anytime soon, he said. Both the RTG and insurgent leaders are concerned that neither side can control rogue elements on the ground to prevent them from engaging in violent acts that would scuttle the plan.

Malaysian Meddling?

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¶14. (S) Another topic of the August 14 talks was concern about efforts by some Malaysian officials to block the dialogue. Tamthai observed that while the Malaysian Government was officially supportive of RTG-insurgent peace talks, certain GOM elements unhelpfully sought to control the process. These elements wish to "own" the dialogue for themselves, and have been known to obstruct the HDC's efforts to facilitate the talks. Malaysian Special Branch police officials have reportedly pressured insurgent leaders - most of who live in exile in Malaysia - not to attend the HDC-sponsored talks, or failing that, have tried to block them from travelling abroad for the talks. Tamthai noted that although Malaysia would be the most convenient venue for the talks from a logistical standpoint, other venues (usually Jakarta) have been used instead because both the insurgents and the RTG wish to avoid prying Malaysian eyes/ears.

¶15. (S) In Tamthai's view, Malaysia's interest is driven in part by legitimate national security interests - Thailand's far south abuts Malaysia, thus the GOM wants to have a role in or even control of the peace process. There

is also, he claimed, some Malaysian jealousy of HDC's role as facilitator (which the GOM would like for itself), and of Indonesia's role as the current venue of choice for the talks. (Note: Tamthai said the Thai MFA informs the Indonesian MFA of each round of talks, typically via a high-level phone call that leaves many players on both sides, including the Thai Embassy in Jakarta, in the dark. End Note). The GOM needs to understand that it is the insurgents, not the RTG, who insist on HDC and Jakarta in their respective roles. And the RTG needs to tell Malaysia to stop obstructing the dialogue. Tamthai said that, in resuming his role as chair of the NSC dialogue committee, the RTG has given him a new authority he did not previously have: a green light to approach Malaysian officials directly to dissuade them from obstructing the dialogue. However Tamthai believes this message initially needs to come from a higher level, and plans to consult with PM Abhisit on the matter.

JOHN